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A  
SERIOUS CAUTION

AGAINST

POPULAR ERRORS:

IN A

DISCOURSE

*Addressed to the Young Persons*

WHO ATTEND THE

**Unitarian Worship,**

AT THE

*Gravel-Pit Meeting, in Hackney,*

By **THOMAS BELSHAM,**

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THE SECOND EDITION.

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Whatever renders religion more rational, renders it more credible: he who by a diligent and faithful examination of the original records, dismisses from the system one article which contradicts the apprehension, the experience or the reasoning of mankind, does more towards recommending the belief, and with the belief the influence of christianity, to the understandings and consciences of serious enquirers, and through them to universal reception and authority, than can be effected by a thousand contenders for creeds and ordinances of human establishment.

FALEY.

**London:**

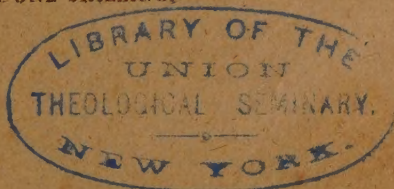
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To the YOUNG PERSONS  
Who attend the UNITARIAN WORSHIP,  
At the GRAVEL-PIT MEETING in HACKNEY,  
THIS DISCOURSE,  
Drawn up for their Use,  
To guard them against POPULAR ERRORS,  
and  
To direct their Views to those plain and  
Primary Truths of the Christian Religion  
Which are the most powerful  
Incentives to virtuous Practice  
and  
The ONLY Foundation of our immortal Hopes,  
Is respectfully inscribed,

By their affectionate Friend,

And faithful Servant,

In the true Gospel of Christ,

THOMAS BELSHAM.

HACKNEY, *January 1, 1801.*

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A  
SERIOUS CAUTION  
AGAINST  
POPULAR ERRORS.

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■ COR. III. 10—15.

“ According to the grace of God, which is given to me, as a  
“ wise master builder, I have laid the foundation, and another  
“ buildeth thereon : but let every one take heed how he buildeth  
“ thereon.

“ For other foundation can no man lay, than that is laid, which  
“ is Jesus Christ.

“ Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, pre-  
“ cious stones, wood, hay, stubble ;

“ Every man's work shall be made manifest ; for the day shall  
“ declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire ; and the fire shall  
“ try every man's work of what sort it is.

“ If any man's work abide which he has built thereupon, he shall  
“ receive a reward.

“ If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss, but he  
“ himself shall be saved ; yet so as by fire.”

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THE apostle by this instructive and impressive  
allegory, means to declare that the fundamental  
doctrine of christianity, which he with much  
labour, and in the midst of many perils, had  
taught the Corinthians, the belief of which con-  
stitutes a person a disciple of Christ and a member

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of

of the visible church, and the rejection of which excludes from the privileges, the profession, the promises, and the hopes of the gospel, is this, that **JESUS IS THE CHRIST**: that Jesus of Nazareth is that great prophet whose advent had been foretold to the Jewish nation, under the character of a holy and illustrious prince and saviour, appointed and set apart by God to abolish the heavy yoke of the law, and to unite all nations, Gentiles as well as Jews, under his peaceful and auspicious government. But though this is the only fundamental doctrine of the christian revelation, in which all who believe, are, as the apostle expresses it, *saved*,\* that is, introduced into a holy and privileged state, yet there are likewise other doctrines of no small importance which are, or may be built on this foundation. Of these some are true, and of the most beneficial tendency. They resemble a magnificent structure of gems and precious metals, erected upon a foundation of adamant, which is liable to no injury or decay, which time cannot impair, or flames destroy. But there are other doctrines, attached by many to this fundamental truth, which are false, worthless, contemptible, and pernicious. They resemble a structure of wood, and hay, and stubble, upon a foundation of rock, unsightly and unsafe, of no beauty, use, or value, and which must soon fall to the ground.

\* See Taylor's Key to the Apostolic Writings, p. 32.



The allegory further teaches us that the day is coming when these several doctrines will be exposed to a severe test, when truth shall be distinguished, approved, and honoured; and error shall be detected, discountenanced, and discarded. The gold, the silver, and the precious stones shall pass through the fiery trial with safety, and shall appear with increased brilliancy and splendour; but the wood, the hay and the stubble, shall be consumed and perish.

We are also taught that they who have taken pains to investigate moral and christian truth, and to exhibit the doctrine of Jesus in its beautiful simplicity and harmony, shall in the end be amply rewarded for their skill and labour; while on the other hand, the men who have busied themselves with mistaken zeal in the propagation of error, and in attaching false and fabulous notions to the fundamental truths of christianity shall suffer for their folly. They shall not indeed suffer eternal damnation as some have rashly maintained; for the apostle declares directly the reverse. He expressly saith, that they shall be saved. What they did was through ignorance, through inattention, and under the influence of inveterate, perhaps insurmountable prejudice. They intended nothing amiss: they were sincere in their error: so blinded were they by their prepossessions, that they really mistook their hay, their stubble and their chaff, for gold and silver,  
and



and gems. They shall not then be consigned by their just and merciful Judge to positive punishment; but they shall suffer loss. Their intellectual eye shall be opened to see the vanity and falsehood of those systems of doctrine which they fondly regarded, and vehemently insisted upon as the grand peculiarities of the gospel. They shall derive no benefit from their unenlightened zeal, and their misplaced industry, but shall feel a poignant regret when they see to how little purpose they have employed their time, and their exertions. They shall be saved as by fire; as a man escapes with his life only, when his house is burnt down which contained all the treasures that he had accumulated for his future subsistence and comfort, and is obliged in poverty and nakedness to re-commence his labours.

Hence the apostle takes just occasion to warn his readers to be very cautious what doctrines they admit, and what opinions they annex to the leading articles of the christian faith, lest in the end they should appear to have embraced error for truth, and their future disappointment and regret should be proportioned to their present well-meaning, but misguided industry and zeal. As I am now entering upon a course of lectures for the winter season, the chief design of which is to instruct my younger friends, of whose attendance I am particularly desirous, in the truth and excellence of  
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the christian doctrine. I propose by way of introduction, to give a brief abstract of those opinions which are prevalent among christians, and which appear to me, after a very attentive, laborious, and I trust impartial investigation for upwards of twenty years, to be erroneous and pernicious; or in the words of the apostle, to be nothing better than wood and hay, and stubble, which cannot stand the fiery scrutiny of free and penetrating research: and likewise to exhibit some of those precious and interesting truths, which being inseparably connected with the divine mission and character of Christ, will bear the strictest examination, which form the surest basis of virtuous conduct and christian consolation, and which, in the apostle's language, are the gold, the silver, and the precious stones, that will endure the severest trial without any diminution of their value.

It would be impossible in the limits of a single discourse to enter minutely into the arguments for or against those opinions which I now propose to state: nor is it consistent with my present design. What I intend is to exhibit a rapid sketch of true and false doctrine, so that all who attend my public ministry may be able to form a distinct conception of the errors which I wish them to discard, and of the truths which I desire them to retain as their most valuable treasure, and to cherish as the main principles of the christian life.

First,

First. Of those opinions which many christians entertain, and which, in the present improved state of christian knowledge it is highly requisite to discard ; the first that I shall mention is the DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY.

That doctrine which teaches that “ There are  
 “ three persons in the god-head, the Father and  
 “ the Son and the Holy Ghost, and that these  
 “ three are one God, the same in substance, equal  
 “ in power and glory.”\* To us who make the doctrine of the apostles the rule of our faith, there is but one God even the Father, and one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus. And how a doctrine like that of a trinity of persons in the god-head, which derives so little support even from the sound of the words of scripture, and which is so diametrically opposite to its uniform tenor and spirit, ever came to prevail in so great a degree among those who profess to take their system of opinions from the writings of the apostles and evangelists, is one of the most extraordinary and inexplicable problems in the history of the human mind. It is a doctrine which under every modification of it must be erroneous and pernicious. If there are three distinct persons in all respects equal, there must be three Gods. If it is affirmed that there

\* Vide Assembly's Catechism.

are only three distinctions, or three somewhats in the godhead, which are neither substances nor modes, it is unintelligible jargon. If by the words Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, nothing more is meant than three attributes or operations of the same individual person, it is using words in a very unscriptural, unusual, and unwarrantable sense, and grossly imposing upon the understandings of those who read or hear such expressions. If it be said that a creature becomes a God, by God dwelling in him, and becoming substantially united to him, such language is nothing more than a combination of unmeaning sounds. If it be affirmed that the three are but one, and the one three, it is a palpable contradiction. If it be urged that the doctrine is a mystery; the same defence is made, and serves equally well for transubstantiation.

2. Another of those doctrines which an attentive and impartial examination of the scriptures will lead us to discard, is that of the PRE-EXISTENCE OF CHRIST, and especially the hypotheses which ascribes to him the formation, support, and government of the world.

I well know that these opinions concerning Jesus Christ are entertained by many judicious, grave and serious persons, some of whom have received it from early instructors, to whom they have been used to look up with reverence and affection, and to whose authority they have been

accustomed to bow with implicit deference. Others have adopted these sentiments in early life, in consequence of what they have judged to be diligent and impartial enquiry, and having long made up their minds upon the subject, they will not now listen to any thing which might excite doubts, and move their faith. But notwithstanding this, with all due deference to the talents and characters of those who may entertain a different opinion, I have no hesitation in pronouncing the doctrine of the pre-existence of Jesus Christ, and the whole system which is connected with it, and dependant upon it, to be erroneous, and unscriptural, and that the whole of this lofty and admired superstructure which has been erected upon the basis of the gospel, is framed of those mean and perishable materials which will be totally consumed in the day when every man's work shall be tried by fire.

The translators of the English Bible, though men of ability, learning and piety, laboured under many strong and deeply rooted prejudices, and with the best intentions, they have inadvertently given to their version of the scriptures a bias from their own pre-conceived opinions. And yet I have little doubt, that if an inquisitive person of common understanding, and a perfect stranger to the controversies which are agitated amongst Christians, should take up this translation, and read it through with the sole view of gaining information concerning the christian doctrine, it would not enter into his mind,

mind, that the writers of these volumes intended to represent Jesus of Nazareth in any other light, than that of a MAN approved of God, by signs and miracles and gifts of the holy spirit. We have indeed strong evidence from recent facts, that persons of plain sense and upright minds, with no advantages of education, and whose prejudices lay in a contrary direction, by reading the publick version of the scriptures with care and attention, comparing one passage with another, and interpreting what is obscure, by what is intelligible and easy of apprehension, and without having read any controversial treatise, have from the evidence of the translated scriptures only, attained complete satisfaction that Jesus Christ was properly a human being, the servant and messenger of God, and that he had no existence before he came into the world.\* And I must take leave to add, that so much light has been cast upon the controversy concerning the pre-existence of Christ within the last twenty or thirty years, that though persons who have been educated in, and long habituated to the contrary opinion, and who have little leisure or opportunity for enquiry and examination, may, with the best dispositions of mind, remain fixed in the principles which they first imbibed, concerning the person of Christ; yet it is morally impossible

\* Vide, Scripture the only guide to Religious Truth. By D. Eaton, of York. Printed for Johnson and Marston.



for young persons of talents and integrity, who possess leisure for enquiry, and the means of information, and who seriously, candidly, and impartially consider the subject, to remain unconvinced of the proper humanity of Christ. Those of us who are acquainted with the interior of the institutions in which young men are educating for the ministry amongst the dissenters, see in them abundant evidence of this fact. And the pains which are taken in some of those seminaries to discourage freedom of enquiry, is a plain proof that the authors of these restraints are fearful of fair investigation, and dare not trust their cause to its own merits.

3. The PERSONALITY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT has no foundation in the christian revelation.

In the lofty and figurative stile of the east, every inanimate agent, and every power of nature, is converted into a living person. Thus the wind, the sun, and the pestilence are personified, and the plagues of Egypt are called evil angels. Agreeably to this tropical language, the wisdom of God which inspired the Jewish prophets, is called his spirit, and the divine energy whereby Christ and his apostles were enabled to perform their miraculous works, is also called the spirit of God, or the holy spirit. Superficial readers not attending to this peculiarity of stile, have understood such metaphorical expressions in a literal sense, and have advanced this energy to the rank  
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of a distinct person, to whom they have applied the uncouth title of a holy ghost, which some have advanced to a perfect equality with the Father and the Son, while others have placed him in the rank of a created spirit inferior to both, but superior to all other derived beings. This is one of those errors which have been long attached to the christian doctrine, and which a little attention and enquiry will lead you to discard: it is indeed so palpably untrue, that many thinking persons who firmly adhere to other opinions, which in my judgment are equally unscriptural, acknowledge the erroneousness of that doctrine, which ascribes real personality to the holy spirit.

4. What is commonly called the DOCTRINE OF ATONEMENT, in every shape and under every modification of it, is unfounded in the christian revelation, and will be discarded by every one whose understanding is truly enlightened in the christian faith.

The calvinistic, which indeed is the only consistent doctrine of atonement, is this. That the original and actual guilt of the elect is infinite, and that the mercy of God cannot be extended to them till his justice has first been satisfied, either in the person of the sinner or his substitute. The second person in the trinity voluntarily becomes the sinner's surety, and by suffering as much in quantity or in value, as the sinner would have done, he pays the debt due to justice, and opens a free course

to the exercise of mercy to the elect. This doctrine has at least the merit of being consistent and intelligible, but that it has no foundation in the christian revelation, I need not spend many words to prove. All other hypotheses concerning the atonement are modifications of this : and in proportion as they recede from their archetype, they become useless and nugatory. One teaches that Christ suffered to exhibit the evil of sin : another that Christ by the merit of his obedience to death, purchased the resurrection of all mankind. Others perhaps may have different hypotheses. But the great objection against them all is, that the scriptures are total strangers to every one of them ; and uniformly represent the final salvation of mankind as the effect of the infinite goodness of God, without respect to any foreign consideration whatever. The death of Christ is indeed represented as a sin-offering, that is, figuratively speaking, as a mean by which Jewish and Gentile sinners were introduced into a new and holy state. Throughout the Epistle to the Hebrews the blood of Christ is symbolically represented as that of a victim, by which the new covenant was ratified, which comprehending all believers, whether Jew or Gentile, is constituted upon more liberal terms, and enriched with better promises, than that made with Moses upon Sinai. But this bears no resemblance to the lately invented, and now commonly received doctrine of the atonement. It is indeed singular, that  
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though this doctrine is by many serious christians thought to be one of the peculiar glories of the gospel, and the belief of it is made essential to salvation, yet that the terms by which they commonly express it, are not to be found in scripture. The "righteousness of Christ" does, indeed, occasionally occur, but in a sense widely different from that which they annex to it, who believe the imputation of it necessary to a sinner's acceptance with God. The "merits of Christ" is a phrase quite of modern invention, and no where to be met with in the scriptures. And though the word atonement does once occur in the New Testament, Rom. v. 11. it is in a sense very different from that in which it is commonly used. The apostle teaches that *man*, not God, receives the atonement by Christ: meaning, indeed, no more than this, that by Jesus Christ the joyful tidings of reconciliation to God are announced to all mankind.

5. The commonly received doctrine concerning the influences of the spirit, is one of those opinions which has been attached to christianity, but which will not stand in the day of trial.

True religion and true philosophy combine to teach this glorious principle, that God is "All and in All." But they also teach us that the agency of God is exerted in the natural, the intellectual, and moral world, in uniform correspondence with certain wise and salutary laws, which for the gene-

ral good he has been pleased to prescribe to himself, and from which he never deviates, but upon very grave and important occasions: so that men may derive benefit from experience from age to age, and may rest assured that the same means, whether mechanical or moral, in the same circumstances will always produce the same effects. But in opposition to this fact, it is a current opinion, that God often, and indeed usually, interposes in a miraculous manner, for the conversion of sinners, and that from arbitrary will, he selects one, and passes over another, without regard to any stated rules of operation. This erroneous notion discourages the use of the regular and efficacious means of virtue, it generates presumption, enthusiasm, and vain fallacious expectations, and it has no just foundation in the scriptures, when attentively perused, and well understood.

6. The popular doctrine of original sin ought to be discarded from the creed of every christian, who is solicitous to maintain the purity of his faith.

The doctrine of original sin, as held by its most zealous advocates, consists of two parts: the first, is the guilt of Adam's transgression imputed to all his posterity, so that every one of his descendants is born in a state of guilt, and under a sentence of eternal misery: the other, is the total corruption of the moral powers of man,

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so that previously to conversion every action and every word, every affection and every thought is sinful. The former doctrine, namely, that all men, without the exception even of new-born infants, are exposed to eternal misery by the imputation of Adam's sin, is so absurd and unscriptural, and contains so gross a reflection upon the character of the Supreme Being, that it is to be hoped few thinking and serious persons will now avow it. This abominable doctrine represents the wise and righteous governor of the universe, as a more savage tyrant than the most merciless despot that ever cursed the human race.

But many believe, that in consequence of Adam's transgression mankind are born into the world with a moral constitution so corrupt and depraved, "so tainted with sin to the very core," that if they are not converted by the special interposition of divine grace, they will be doomed to inevitable and everlasting woe. And with this they also maintain, that without God's preventing mercy, it is impossible either to will, or to do, what is right. Hence it follows, that the great mass of mankind are exposed to eternal condemnation for being what their Creator made them; when at the same time they were left destitute of power, not only to rectify their depraved nature, but even to will and desire to amend. To avoid this conclusion they tell us, that man was at first made perfect, but that Adam by his fall, entailed a corrupt

nature upon all his posterity. A miserable evasion. As if the posterity of Adam were not as much the creatures of God as their remote ancestor. No truth in morals shines forth in a clearer or more conspicuous light than this, that whatever man is by nature, he is what the God of nature made him. If he is indeed, as some represent, naturally a fallen, depraved creature, immersed in guilt, and doomed to misery, it is no fault of his; the blame is wholly imputable to his Creator. But the fact is far otherwise, and though there is much evil in the world, both natural and moral, I doubt not that there is a great preponderance of good, and prevailing tendencies to a still better and happier state. And I am firmly convinced that they who take such unwearied pains to propagate these false and dishonourable representations of God and his works, however venial their error, however innocent their intention may be, are labouring with perverted industry to erect a miserable structure of wood, and hay, and stubble, which in the great day of trial shall be consumed to ashes, and scattered by the winds.

7. The commonly received notions concerning angels and devils, are to be regarded as destitute of all foundation in the christian revelation, and as doctrines of no practical value.

That Beings of an order superior to men may possibly exist in the creation of God, and that such may possibly be employed occasionally as  
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the messengers of his will to men, and the instruments of executing his purposes, cannot be denied. But no wise man will draw a conclusion from possibility to fact. This notion of the agency of good and evil spirits, was indeed current among the Jews, after their return from the Babylonian captivity, and there are frequent allusions to it in the New Testament. But it is a doctrine which cannot be proved, or made probable from the light of nature, and it is no where taught as a doctrine of revelation : a judicious christian, therefore, will discard it from his creed : and that not only as a groundless, but as a useless and even a pernicious tenet, which tends to diminish our regard to the omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent God, and to excite superstitious respect to, and unreasonable expectations from, imaginary and fictitious beings. We have no concern with any invisible being but God, in him therefore let all our thoughts, and desires, and expectations center ; nor let us waste our time and labour in fruitless enquiries after the existence, the powers, the characters, and spheres of action of other supposed spiritual beings, concerning whom it is impossible for us to attain any satisfactory information.

The doctrine of evil spirits is a notion which the Jews appear to have collected, during the captivity, from the oriental philosophy, of which it is well known to have formed a part. It was, perhaps, understood by their learned men in a



figurative and allegorical sense, but certainly by the common people in a gross and literal one. In the New Testament the language of the prevailing mythology is occasionally borrowed, and the word satan, that is, adversary, and devil, that is slanderer, are sometimes used to denote the principle of evil, sometimes the idolatrous, anti-christian, and persecuting power. But the existence of an evil spirit is not taught as a revealed truth : and, indeed, the existence of such an omnipresent, omniscient and powerful spirit, as the devil is commonly supposed to be, is a fact totally destitute of all evidence, and in the highest degree improbable. The powers ascribed to the devil are absolutely incompatible with the unlimited authority and the wise and just government of God, and the belief of such a being too often furnishes an apology for vice, fills the mind with groundless terrors, lays a foundation for the most abject superstition, and strikes at the root of divine revelation.

8. The doctrine of election, is the arbitrary choice of some to virtue and happiness, without any ground of preference, but absolute will : reprobation, is the dooming or leaving the great mass of mankind to hopeless and everlasting misery by an arbitrary decree. Effectual calling, and irresistible grace, is the miraculous conversion of the elect, at the time destined in the divine councils : and final perseverance, is the absolute  
impossi-

impossibility of the final apostacy of any who are thus predestinated, chosen, and called. The very definition of these tenets, is a sufficient proof of their inconsistency with sound reason, and with the christian revelation. If God be wise and good, these doctrines cannot be true.

9. The eternity of hell torments, or that any of the creatures of God should exist for ever in a state of pure, or preponderant misery, is a doctrine so irreconcilable with the first principles of justice and equity, so dishonourable to the Divine character, so contradictory to all the appearances of nature, and so inconsistent with all the representations in the scriptures of the future condition of the wicked, that a well-informed christian will not hesitate a moment to reject it with abhorrence. Had the christian revelation, indeed, contained, such a doctrine as this, it would have been the greatest curse with which the world was ever visited, and so far from deserving the character of glad tidings of great joy, it would have been pregnant with intelligence of the most exquisite and transcendent horror.

Whether the impenitently vicious may not ultimately be destroyed, is perhaps a more dubious question. Natural appearances seem, indeed, to indicate this catastrophe: and many expressions in the christian scriptures would lead to the same conclusion. But as the resurrection of the vicious portion of mankind is expressly and repeatedly  
asserted

asserted by Jesus and his apostles, and as it is in the highest degree incredible that men should be raised from a state of insensibility for no purpose but to be exposed to exquisite misery for a definite period, and from thence to pass to insensibility again, we may justly and safely conclude, that the sufferings of the wicked will be remedial, and that it is the benevolent purpose of God that all his rational offspring shall be ultimately happy.

10. The doctrine of an intermediate state, that is, of a state of conscious existence between death and the resurrection, is in many views so pleasing, and so interesting, that we are prone to cling to it with fondness, and are reluctant to be deprived of so precious a consolation. But this must likewise be discarded, if we are desirous to regulate our faith by the standard of reason, of truth, and of christianity. That the soul, or principle of thought, should be capable of perception and action, in a state of separation from the body, is contrary to every fact which we know concerning the human mind, which maintains, and to all appearance can maintain, no intercourse with the external world, but by the intervention of corporeal organs: and to affirm that it may perceive and act independantly of the body, in another state of existence, is gratuitous and fanciful. Moreover, the apostle Paul, in his epistle to the Corinthians, so expressly declares, that

that if there be no resurrection of the dead, our faith and hope is in vain, and that on this supposition all who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished; that it is impossible he could entertain any hope of a future life, independent of a resurrection; consequently he could have no expectation of an intermediate state of conscious existence.

II. The obligation of sabbatical institutions, upon which many lay such unwarrantable stress, is expressly and peremptorily abolished by the christian law, and the imposition of them is an infringement upon christian liberty.

The observation of the first day of the week as a religious festival, and as a season of public worship and thanksgiving, in commemoration of the resurrection of Jesus, has prevailed from the earliest ages of christianity, and will I trust continue in the christian church to the latest period of time. This primitive, and edifying practice, I by no means desire either to discourage or to supersede. Neither is it my present intention to dispute the right of the civil power to appoint a public holiday, and to require, upon stated or particular occasions, a general cessation from the common duties and occupations of life. All that I maintain is, that Christ our Lord and Lawgiver, has appointed no such institution in his church. The apostle Paul, authorized no doubt by his great Master, has expressly and repeatedly announced

nounced the entire abolition of the Jewish sabbath : and if another hath been appointed in its stead, let the law be produced, and I will readily bow to its authority. But I am confident that nothing of this kind is to be found in the christian scriptures. Indeed that one day should be more holy than another, or that any occupation whatever that is morally lawful on one day, should be morally unlawful on another, is a distinction unfounded in reason, wholly unauthorized by Jesus and his apostles, and unknown in the primitive and purest ages of the church. This fact is so undeniable, that none can doubt it, who have enquired seriously into it\*. A christian ought to maintain a becoming dignity and gravity of character and conduct, at all times and in all places ; he should always keep at his proper post, and be always active and alert in the discharge of duty. And to such an one I will venture to pronounce that every day is alike. While, on the contrary, the man who neglects the great duties of justice, benevolence, and piety, will in vain seek to compensate for them by a strict attention to sabbatical institutions. That a sabbath may be innocently observed by those who think themselves bound in conscience to observe it, is expressly allowed by the apostle. But there is great danger lest that sabbatical spirit, which many cherish with so much

\* Vid. Theological Repository, vol. vi. p. 363—366.

eagerness, as though salvation depended upon it, should generate a spirit of censoriousness and spiritual pride, and should diminish the attention to moral duties. And, surely, the compulsory idleness of the great mass of the people, can be productive of nothing but folly, and vice, and mischief.

12. The opinion commonly entertained concerning the plenary inspiration of all the books both of the Jewish and Christian scriptures, is an error which an inquisitive and judicious christian will see abundant reason to discard.

The scriptures in general, considered as a faithful record of revealed truth, and especially the christian scriptures, are a collection of writings of inestimable value. But injudicious persons, by their endeavours to exalt them above their proper level, inadvertently depreciate their value, and obstruct their main design. To assert the plenary inspiration of every book in that various collection, is ascribing to them a prerogative which they never claim for themselves, it is affirming that which can never be proved, it is involving serious and reflecting minds in inexplicable doubts and difficulties, it is exposing revelation to the sarcasms of infidelity, and loading the evidence of its divine authority with a burdensome and needless incumbrance. Whatever is prophetic must necessarily be inspired : but all besides, neither claims, nor can be admitted to be any thing more than a faithful



faithful narration of the most important truths, by men of the best information, and of the most unblemished character.

Having thus exhibited a brief abstract of the most obvious and important of those opinions, which are received without hesitation by very many professing christians, which are by them attached to the fundamental doctrines of christianity, and regarded as its peculiar glory, but which a liberal and judicious enquiry into the scriptures will lead us to discard, I now proceed

Secondly, To state with brevity and conciseness those essential truths, which being founded in right reason, and made known or confirmed by the christian revelation, are of the greatest value; and the practical belief of which will be attended with the most beneficial consequences.

Having removed the rubbish, which loads and disgraces the foundation, we are now to cast a rapid glance upon those precious materials, which being duly cemented to that great and acknowledged basis of the christian faith, the divine mission and character of Jesus Christ, will form a splendid superstructure, which will pass with safety and honour through the fiery trial, and will ensure to the wise builder proportionate and everlasting reward.

It is indeed, much easier to detect error than to discover truth: and while a person who thinks freely and impartially, and whose enquiries are govern-



governed by a serious and supreme desire to attain just conceptions of christian doctrine, will see abundant reason to discard many popular errors, he will be very slow in the acquisition of moral and religious truth, and will discover few principles, the evidence of which will be completely satisfactory. But these few will be of great value in the estimation of the virtuous enquirer, and like gems of the finest water, they will be dear to his heart, in proportion to the smallness of their number, and their vast intrinsic worth. The upright and inquisitive mind will experience more real satisfaction in an intelligible though scanty creed, than the implicit and unreflecting believer can find in all the articles of his voluminous faith. The principles of the moral, like those of the natural world, are few and simple, but powerful in their operation, and infinitely extended and diversified in their effects.

1. A virtuous and well-informed mind will maintain a steady belief in the existence, and attributes, the character, and government of God.

Of that original, All-perfect Being, by whom the universe was created : whose wise, powerful and benignant providence superintends and governs all : whose notice and energy extends to all creatures, and to all events : all whose counsels and designs are prompted by infinite benevolence, directed by infinite wisdom, and carried into effect by irresistible power : whose fixed immutable  
purpose

purpose it is to produce the greatest possible sum of happiness, by the best possible means; and who can never in any the minutest instance be disappointed in the accomplishment of his pleasure. In the belief of such a Being, his Father and Benefactor, his Protector and his Friend, his Guide and Portion, the virtuous heart triumphs with joy unspeakable; upon his paternal providence it can rest with unlimited confidence; to his wise dispensations it can bow with the most dutiful resignation and chearful acquiescence; and in obedience to him, and in communion with him, it experiences unmixed satisfaction, and a calm delight, incapable of being disturbed by the vicissitudes of external things.

2. The serious and impartial enquirer, after due attention to the proper evidence, will see ample reason to admit the divine mission and character of Jesus Christ, who, by his doctrine and his miracles, and especially by his resurrection from the dead, has abolished death and brought life and immortality to light: who hath instructed us in the practice of virtue, and left us an example that we should follow his steps; and whose second appearance we are taught to expect at the destined, but unknown period in the revolution of ages, to raise the dead, to judge the world, and to reward every one according to his works.

3. The virtuous enquirer will readily admit the sufficiency of the scriptures, and will regard the  
writings

writings of the apostles and evangelists, as containing a faithful and credible account of the christian doctrine, as competent, if studied with diligence and attention, to supply him with all needful information upon the most important subjects, and able to make him wise unto salvation.

4. He will also see abundant evidence that under the government of God, virtue shall be ultimately honoured and rewarded, and vice shall meet with its due punishment. That to be virtuous is to be wise and happy ; to be vicious is to be foolish and miserable. And under the influence of the high and awful expectations of christianity, he will see it to be both his duty and his interest to live in the habitual and uniform practice of piety and virtue, giving all diligence to make his calling and election sure.

THE END.

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